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# THE ART OF FIREARMS IN FICTION

A PRIMER FOR SELF-PUBLISHERS

*Steve Allen*

*Additional material by Aden Nichols*

# A note from Louise



I'm hugely grateful to **Steve Allen** for taking the time to write this primer.

I'd originally intended to create this resource myself, but quickly realized that a someone with a comprehensive, working knowledge of firearms would be in a stronger position to give you really usable guidance. I've never even seen a gun. And I live in the UK, where gun ownership is rare.

Steve's a retired soldier turned specialist freelance editor of firearm and military-related particulars.

He edits books with lots of gun action in them. But he's worked with them, too – held them, cleaned them, studied them, shot with them. He understands firearms, knows what they are, what they can do, what they sound like, and why one's different from another.

And that's why he's the best person to help you avoid mistakes when you're including guns in your fiction. I hope you learn as much as I have from this book!

Huge thanks, too, to **Aden Nichols**, a Special Forces veteran and now editor who kindly took the time to offer his expert knowledge to improve this booklet further.

*Louise*

# About the contributors

**Steve Allen** is a retired soldier living north of Seattle, WA, with his lovely wife and daughters, and a neurotic terrier and a goofy black Labrador. When not editing, Steve wanders the Pacific Northwest on roads less travelled, searching for good books and very cold beer. Email:

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**Aden Nichols** is a Special Forces veteran. In addition to having freelanced for a number of major defense industry trade rags and consumer journals, he was a senior staff editor of *International Combat Arms* magazine, founder and editor-in-chief of *Combat Weapons* magazine, and military-aerospace contributing editor for *Popular Mechanics*. On the civilian side, he is a former staff editor of *Guns & Ammo* magazine and *Hunting* magazine. These days he runs **Little Fire Editorial Services**.

# Introduction: why you need to avoid mistakes when writing about guns

I'm a specialist freelance editor of firearm and military-related particulars. I see gun-related writer mistakes all too frequently. Many *simple* firearm mistakes can be avoided without problems.

Unfortunately, many of the firearm mistakes I see are *not* simple, nor are they so easily fixed. Insignificant firearms mistakes inflame the nitpickers and have them shitting on your reviews.

Savvy readers catch even the smallest of mistakes. After a mistake, readers question your writing, wondering what other mistakes you've made. Make too many and your story falls apart.

Basic firearm mistakes cause you to lose credibility. Even in fiction, you must maintain credibility.

What follows are the frequent firearm mistakes that I see in fiction manuscripts.



# 1. It's just a gun

Is it ever just a gun? Yes and no.

Any gun is **not substitutable** at will for another gun. Not all guns share the same features, nor can one gun do everything. Just as mechanics need more than one wrench, some tasks require different guns.

All firearms **share common basic features** but are quite varied, similar to tools. Choose the correct tool for your characters based on the story and situation.

Do not give the hero a 9mm pistol nailing bad guys at 900 yards (823 metres). Use a scoped high-power rifle for shots greater than 600 yards (549 metres).

A shotgun, even when loaded with rifled slugs, cannot shoot accurately across a valley. Shotguns and pistols are designed for up close and personal.



## 2. 30-calibre clip

I don't fault writers for simple and common terminology and vernacular mistakes, unless their target readers would.

I ignore basic firearms terminology mistakes as long as the author is **clear on intent and meaning**.

Most people use cartridges, shells, rounds and bullets interchangeably. Referring to a magazine as a clip is usually not a story-killer – unless you're writing very gun-centric fiction where the character would not make that mistake.

Firearms terminology and acronyms are writer-trapping quagmires – avoid them if you can. Establish gun terms early in the manuscript.

If your writing feels like you're trying too hard, your readers will know.

Be consistent with your terminology and keep things simple. If you refer to a magazine as a clip, do so throughout the story. Flipping back and forth between terms confuses readers.

Use the term **assault rifle** with care. Know if you will offend your readers by the use of 'assault rifle or if they will even care.

There is no *precise* lawful definition of what is an assault rifle. Adolf Hitler is credited with creating the term as a propaganda piece during WWII. In the US, assault rifle is generally used by politicians demonizing a particular weapon, hoping to ban by legislation its ownership and sale.



# 3. Clip-fed revolvers ... and reloading

The **revolver reloaded by a magazine** is a less frequent mistake, but one I notice occasionally.

Revolvers are loaded by stripper clips, speed loaders or loose rounds, not magazines. Know at least the basics of how and with what the guns are reloaded in your story.

**Reloading** a weapon is best kept general, with as few words as possible, before returning to the action quickly. Explaining that your character popped open his revolver, dumped the empty cartridges, then refilled it with loose rounds from his pocket, snapping it closed when full, is sufficient.

Better yet, just mention that the character reloaded and let the readers form their own mental images. You don't need to describe every single step of reloading a gun, because it detracts from the action.



# 4. Your hero put what on a what?

Improper use of **firearm accessories** or impossible accessory attachment is a fairly common mistake. For example – rogue Chinese general assassinates the Chinese president with a suppressed revolver.

Frequent mistakes that I see include:

- **Bayonets** mounted on weapons lacking a bayonet-attachment point.
- **Tactical flashlights and lasers** mounted on weapons lacking accessory rails. E.g. putting a huge Surefire weapon light on a Ruger LCP. The small Ruger pistol lacks accessory rails and is dwarfed by the bigger heavier Surefire light.
- Attached **tactical goodies** inhibiting the weapon's ability to function. If the laser, light, knife, etc. on your character's weapon blocks the ejection port, slide, trigger, or the muzzle of his gun, it might fire – once.

- Lights, lasers, grips, knives, etc. **taped** to weapons. Unless writing post-apocalyptic fiction or satire, avoid taping anything to a weapon using Duct Tape, Gorilla Tape or electrician's tape.
- **Accessory overload.** There are numerous lights, lasers, grenade launchers, breaching shotguns, night and day optics, etc. that can be mounted to weapon rails. Don't put nearly every accessory on your hero's gun at the same time. Add and remove accessories as needed.

With attachments and accessories, follow the **KISS principle**. For a writer unfamiliar with guns, KISS means Keep It Simple, Stupid.

More is not always better. Complicating firearms in combat can be disastrous for your hero.



# 5. Thumb-safety Glock

A thumb safety on a Glock pistol is the most common firearm mistake I see.

There is **no manual safety** on all common models of Glock pistols.

Confusing matters even more, for military pistol trials, Glock just released two versions of pistols with thumb safeties.

Whether the thumb-safety Glocks will be sold to the public is yet to be determined.



# 6. Bonus features

Here are some additional features mistakes that I see:

- Writers **adding features** (other than thumb safeties) to pistols that are not included by the manufacturer.
- Pistols firing (or not) with the **magazine removed**. Many European-made pistols will not fire with the magazine removed; only some American-made pistols have this feature.
- **Thumb safety on revolvers:** that damn thumb safety rears its ugly head again. There are very few revolvers that have manual safeties, none of which would make a decent sidearm for a character.
- A less common features mistake is **changeable grips on polymer pistols** with solid, moulded grips. Heckler and Koch and Smith and Wesson both manufacture polymer-framed pistols with exchangeable grip panels, but not all polymer-framed pistols share this feature.



# 7. The sound of silence

**Unfamiliarity with suppressors** causes frequent writing mistakes. Movies and video games misrepresent suppressor efficacy.

Seeing special operations forces (SOF) units in the news, in video games and in movies, where every weapon is suppressed, has increased the appearance of suppressors in fiction. In *uberguy* lit, suppressors are quite common.

The movie *No Country for Old Men* is a horrible portrayal of suppressor use by a criminal. Shooting video games such as *Hitman* and *Call of Duty* also fail to portray suppressors correctly.

Commonly called **silencers**, suppressors excel at quieting gunshots. Most suppressors shooting supersonic (greater than 1,126 ft/s or 342 m/s)

ammunition reduce the sound of the gunshot to barely below 85 dB, the hearing-protection safety threshold.

Suppressors **fail to silence the sonic boom or crack of the bullet breaking the sound barrier**. People close by may not be familiar with the crack of a bullet, but something out of the ordinary happened and they are unlikely to react as if nothing occurred.

Says Aden Nichols: 'Take care with **unit terminology** too. Special Forces and its abbreviation SF only applies to a specific branch of the US Army (aka Green Berets). The term special operations forces – SOF – or special ops is the more generic umbrella term encompassing such specialized units from all branches of service (Navy SEALs, etc.). This is a subject that SF types are understandably sensitive about.'

# 7. The sound of silence ... continued

Usually the **crack of the bullet is lost in the gunshot**. Suppressors sound similar to a loud nail gun or a car door being slammed shut, followed by the crack of the bullet breaking the sound barrier.

To get the ridiculous mouse-fart sound from the movies requires specially loaded, subsonic ammunition. Some guns will not shoot subsonic ammo very well, increasing the likelihood of malfunctions.

Despite common perception, with proper paperwork, suppressors are legally owned in most US states. According to the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (BATFE), very few legally owned suppressors are used in crime.

Possessing a suppressor in the US without proper paperwork is a felony. If your hero breaks federal laws, he or she had better have a very good reason.

The specific legality in the US of Title II devices, such as suppressors, short-barrelled rifles and machine guns is outside the purview of this ebook.



# 8. Is machine gun – no?

Now we're onto confusion between what is a **machine gun** and what is not. As an author, know if your character uses an illegal weapon such as a machine gun.

An AR-15 is *not* a machine gun according to the BATFE. An M16 *is* a machine gun. The AR-15 and the M16 look exactly alike because they're based on the same gun platform, but with very different internals.

The few semiautomatic rifles able to be converted to full auto require extensive firearms knowledge and machining.

Converting a legal weapon into a machine gun is generally not worth the cost and effort. Unless required by the story, I suggest staying away from illegally converted weapons.

The BATFE ensures that weapons sold in the US cannot be easily converted to machine guns. Easily convertible older gun models are either banned by law or covered under Title II and treated as a machine gun.



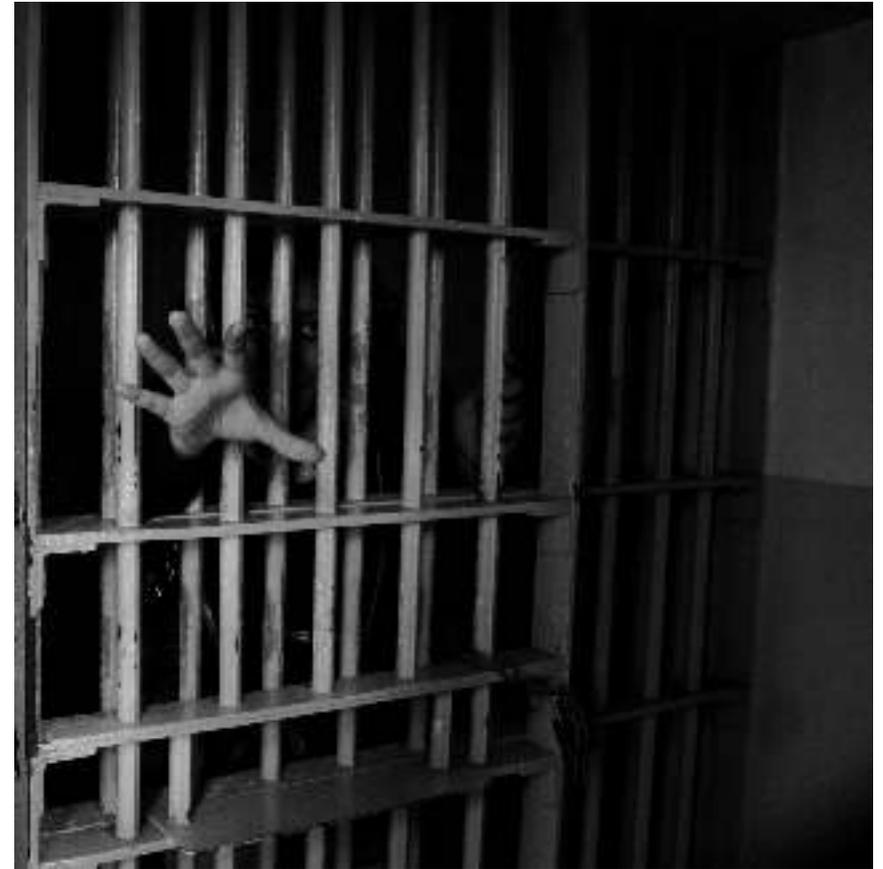
# 9. I fought the law

If your character possesses an illegal weapon, there has to be a **very good reason why**. The vast majority of firearms enthusiasts are law-abiding people who would never commit a felony by possessing an illegal weapon.

The saying goes, 'Better to be judged by twelve than carried by six'. Twelve people sit on a jury; six people carry a coffin.

If your characters use illegal weapons, they should also understand that there will be severe legal consequences later.

There are **firearm scofflaws**, most of them extremists and felons. Your law-disregarding hero falls into this category. I don't expect writers to be experts on the myriad gun laws. In the US, the BATFE lists illegal weapons on its webpage. Most other countries have similar law-enforcement agencies; a little internet research goes a long way.



# 10. Damned few reasonable back stories

Give your characters **reasonable back stories**. Your character's back story explains plausible reasons why your character possesses (or lacks) skills.

A character who grew up in East Los Angeles, CA, is likely proficient in colloquial Spanish. If your character doesn't speak any Spanish, there must be a good reason why. If a former Recon Marine can't swim, something is fishy.

Giving your character an SF background is an expedient way of explaining his weapon talent. But he **doesn't have to be a member of an SF unit in order to be good with guns**. Many non-SF veterans, especially those who served in the infantry, are quite skilled.

Due to the popularity of SEALs, Delta, Rangers, Marine Force Recon and other SF units in the media and

movies, members of the clandestine units have become quite common in fiction.

In the romance genres lately, it seems that every man was a member of some ultra-secret SF unit. If you want your hunky love interest to be a veteran of one of the SF units, that's fine. This is fiction not reality – just don't overdo it.

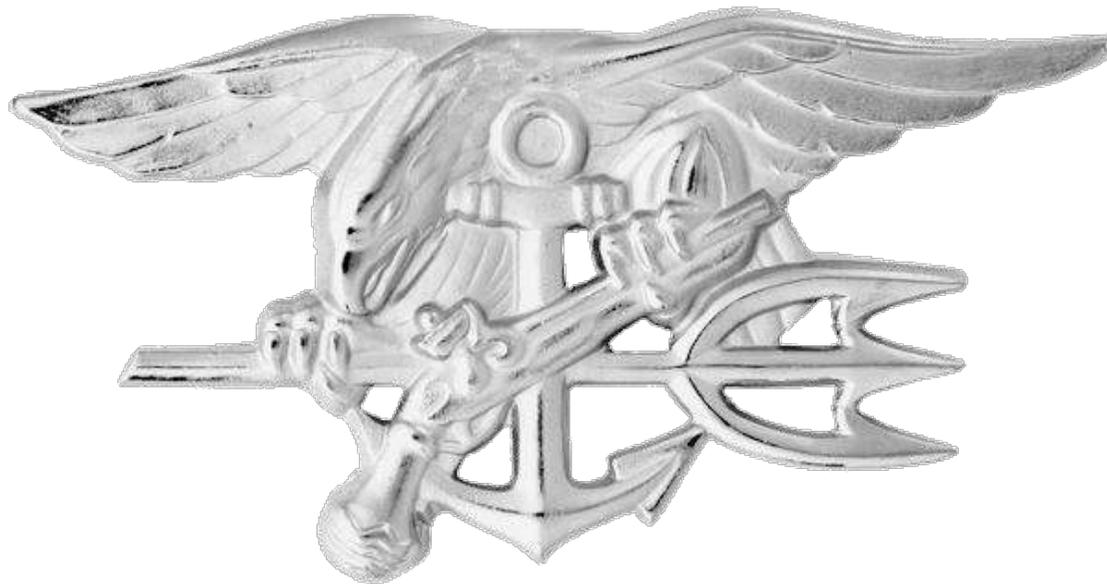


# 10. Damned few ... continued

SEAL team members have a saying – ‘Damned few’ – with a couple of meanings. One is that there are very few who make it through training to the teams. The second is a Robert Burns quote: ‘To us, and those like us, damn few, and most of them are dead.’

To be one of the damned few is indeed quite rare. Your US Navy veteran is far more likely to be Bob the ship-riding gas turbine mechanic rather than Larry from SEAL Team 6.

Maybe Bob tried SEAL training, but didn’t pass for some reason. There’s no shame in not making the cut for SF. Not everyone belongs in SF. Many military members are not interested in joining SF.



# 10. Damned few ... continued

If your character is a former member of an SF outfit, **don't have him boast** about how many missions he's been on or how many men he's killed. The SF, in particular the Green Berets, are known as the 'quiet professionals' for a reason. These men have no need to brag about their missions, most of which are highly classified.

Know which **schools** your SF character would have gone through in order to belong to that unit. Also know where the SF schools for that branch of service are located.

Keep in mind that the military renames and moves schools, so know where your character would have been according to the date and what the school would have been called then.

SEALs identify with the **Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL training (BUD/S 'buds') class**

**number** they graduated with. No SEAL ever forgets his class number; he had to scream it for six months. BUD/S class numbers and training are not classified. BUD/S class numbers are three numerals, i.e. class 100.

**Don't mix official-sounding military jargon and numbers for no reason.** No one graduated BUD/S class India 33 or was a member of SEAL Tactical Operations, Section November.

Be very careful about creating **super-secret SF units**; you will irritate veterans. There are no secret SEALs, or other SF members, who didn't pass the qualification courses.

You cannot have a Green Beret character that never went to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, or a Recon Marine that cannot swim.

# 11. Toys, toys and more toys

**Don't stretch gear and weapon credibility.** Avoid having your character possess every possible weapon, accessory and gadget.

It's understandable that you want to give your characters the best equipment possible, but there had better be a very good reason why you give them six-figure night-vision gear (NVG), a six-figure weapon, and dress them in the most expensive tactical gear available.

Unless your character has more money than God, set a reasonable budget for weapons and equipment. Giving him or her a few good pieces of Modular Lightweight Load-carrying Equipment (MOLLE) gear and reasonably priced, commonly available weapons does not stretch your credibility.

Have your character 'shop' smartly; **investing in quality gear** goes a long way in establishing the quality of the character's persona. Buying flashy, expensive and low-quality gear lowers your character's persona.

The SF and other clandestine outfits possess incredible budgets and direct access to defence contractors that average citizens do not. There must be a plausible explanation if your character possesses elite gear.



# 12. Tactical, tacti-fool vs tacti-cool

Give your characters a good weapons load-out and good gear. Know the difference between **tactical**, **tacti-cool** and **tacti-fool**. Arming your characters reasonably takes some practice and restraint.

**Tactical** learns about guns, gear and shooting on the range. Tactical is your character spending hours on ranges practising, attending classes and training to better his or her skills.

**Tacti-fool** reads about guns, gear and shooting on the internet, believing himself (usually a trait of men; especially rare in women) to be an expert.

**Tacti-cool**: Unless writing satire, parody, comedy, etc., avoid giving your characters tacti-cool gear. It looks awesome but is of dubious worth.



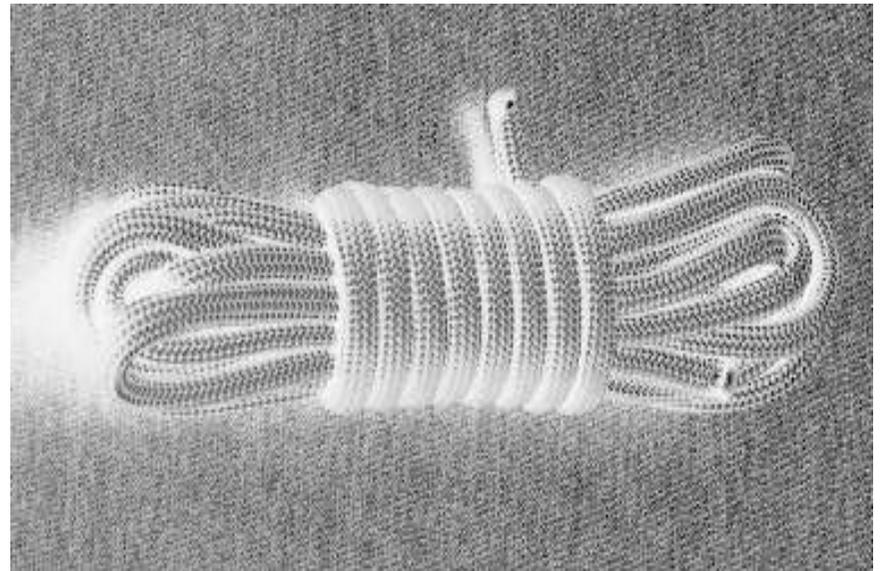
# 12. Tacti-cool ... continued

Unless writing satire, parody, comedy, etc., **avoid giving your characters tacti-cool gear**. Loading a character with tacti-cool gear, and having him learn the hard way the value of quality gear is a good use of tacti-cool stuff – just don't overdo it.

This is what it looks like:

- Ginormous hollow-handled and heavy survival knives filled with gear of questionable worth. These survival knives usually come with a sheath that's as ridiculous as the knife.
- Gaudy anti-personnel hatchets with ludicrous blades better suited for use as a prop in a cheesy post-apocalyptic movie than survival.
- Altoids- and sardine-can-sized personal survival kits.
- Tactical baby carriers with more MOLLE slots than anyone could ever need.

- Paracord overload. For a while, nearly every piece of tactical gear (especially if it was black) such as knives, axes, folding shovels, etc. had to be wrapped in miles of paracord.
- Ridiculous camouflage patterns and hues. No skulls, dragons, or weird colours.



# 13. Oooh, shiny!

I cringe every time an author tells me, 'But it looks cool.' Don't give your characters **ridiculous and worthless gear based on looks**.

Movies are incredibly influential, which is why I mention them so often. Looking cool is great in the movies; it can get you killed in the field. Avoid gear such as:

- Gaudy anti-personnel hatchets (there's a reason I mention this mistake often).
- Close-quarters battle (CQB) weapons *du jour* such as the kerambit, a hooked Indonesian fighting knife. Just as society chases fads (gluten-free, kale, acai berry, veggie smoothies, tiny homes, bacon, etc.) so does tactical gear.

- Avoid exotic, experimental or ammo *du jour* (unless the story requires it). When flechette ammo was in vogue, I saw a lot of usage in fiction, particularly in shotguns.



# 13. Oooh, shiny!

- Ginormous fighting knives, the envy of Crocodile Dundee.
- Cheap samurai swords or other bargain, mass-produced martial-arts weapons designed to look cool.
- Explosive tipped arrows.

Low-cost, mass-produced tactical gear is designed to empty the tacti-fool's wallet, not actually to be used in combat.

A simple rule of thumb to follow is: **if the elite troops don't carry it, avoid arming your character with it.**

A caveat is: if the weapon fits the character's back story, then it might be okay.

For example, if your character studied Silat (Indonesian martial art) and carries a kerambit it fits the story. If your character learned Eskrima (also known as Doce Pares; Filipino martial art) while living in Cebu, then arming her with fighting sticks fits the story.



# 14. Practise, practise, practise ...

Confucius said: 'To study and at times practise what one has learned, is that not a pleasure?'

Shooting skills are perishable. If your character hasn't touched a weapon for more than 20 years, he cannot pick up a rifle nailing targets past 1,400 yards (1.3 km) with expert precision.

There is raw talent that can give your character an edge, but don't overdo it.

Your character has to practise his shooting skills. Most professional shooters train two to three times a week.



# 15. Ninja and samurai vs Walker, Texas Ranger

Be very **careful about making your characters martial-arts masters**. Aside from the movies, it's rare for a young person to master any martial art. Asian cultures generally believe that age equates to wisdom.

A young character may be rather adept at a martial art, but he would *not* be seen as a master.

True martial-arts masters are rare; seeing one in full-out combat is exceedingly rare. Fictional martial-arts masters such as Eric Van Lustbader's ninja Nicholas Linnear are truly frightening, but even Linnear has his limits.

Do not create Chuck Norris scenarios designed solely so that the character can show off their martial-arts (or firearms) prowess. If the scene does nothing for the story, remove it.

Firearms are the bane of the martial arts. In 1877, at the Battle of Shiroyama, Japan, conscripts armed with rifles wiped out an exceptionally well-trained samurai army.

In *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark*, Indiana shoots a swordsman rather than fighting him hand to hand. Why fight someone if you have a gun?

There is an old saying with several variations, but this is my favourite: 'God made some men small, and some men large; but Colt made them all equal.'



# 16. The incredible pack of holding

**Resist the urge to give your character a pack with a carrying capacity far exceeding its physical size.**

Establish at the beginning of the story if your world has abilities such as magic or technology that alter the laws of physics.

In the middle of the story, the character should not pull ATVs, powered body armour, and crew-served weapons out of a small day pack before establishing that such things are possible. Your hero should also not coincidentally pull what he needs from his pack every time. Coincidence should get your character *into* trouble not out of it.

An inexhaustible supply of ammo and gear works in video games, but it isn't realistic. Where's the challenge if your character can pull whatever he needs at any moment from his pack?

Create plot with the character's actions and words, not stuff. Give your characters agency, letting them affect the story, rather than having the story push the character around. As much as possible your character should be more active and less reactive.



# 17. He-man

Your character can **only carry so much for so long** and still be combat effective. The indefatigable character is another mistake that I used to blame solely on Hollywood, but lately more on combat-orientated video games.

Loading a character down with gear weighing more than 70 pounds (32 kg) and having that character remain for days in top fighting condition stretches credibility.

Even if your character is in exceptional physical condition, he will tire quickly carrying such a heavy load.

Look at the weight carried by long-distance hikers on the Pacific Crest Trail. If your character carries his equipment for an extended length of time, lighten the load.



# 18. It keeps on going and going ...

Here's we're talking about characters shooting their guns throughout the book, but never once reloading.

This Hollywood-induced mistake is common enough that most authors don't even consider the need for their character to reload.

In one manuscript, I counted over a thousand bullets fired, but no one ever reloaded. You don't have to detail every time your characters touch their weapons, but if your story has significant gunplay, have the characters occasionally reload.



# 19. It keeps on going and going ... again

A common Hollywood- and videogame-induced mistake is guns without maintenance shooting forever **without malfunctioning**.

Guns, like anything mechanical, need **occasional maintenance**.

Failure to perform at least some maintenance once in a while significantly increases the likelihood of firearms malfunction. Glock pistols and AK-47 rifles are famous for operating no matter the abuse they suffer, but their accuracy suffers.

There's always the chance that any semi-auto weapon might jam. Some pistols are more particular about the ammo they're fed; some not so much.

Pistols designed for use by military and law enforcement are more forgiving than pistols designed for competitive shooting.



# 20. Is really great weapon – no?

In your story, are the **weapons effects far outside of real-world tactical capability**? This mistake usually applies to explosives such as **grenades**, but can apply to **bullet performance** as well.

Avoid **magic- or single-bullet syndrome**. Sometimes shooters get lucky, but not every shot, no matter how skilled the marksman, is going to go exactly where the shooter wanted. Firing one round to take out several opponents is highly unlikely and usually impractical.

Annually in the US, guns are used defensively between 700,000 and 2.5 million times (depending on whose numbers you use). In defensive use, guns fail to kill approximately 98% of the time. The vast majority of those shot survive, so **not everyone in your story who's shot should die**.

**Explosive lethality** is hard to define exactly. Most authors follow the awful example of Hollywood and video games when explaining the effects of weapons such as the 40mm grenade.

Learn the approximate **effective range of grenades**, whether they be hand-thrown or launched by a weapon.

A character with a 40mm grenade launcher is impressive. You lose credibility when the 40mm grenades in your story behave inconsistently with real-world capability. I wish that the 40mm grenades I used in combat were as effective as the ones I see in fiction.



# 21. Future weapons / back in time

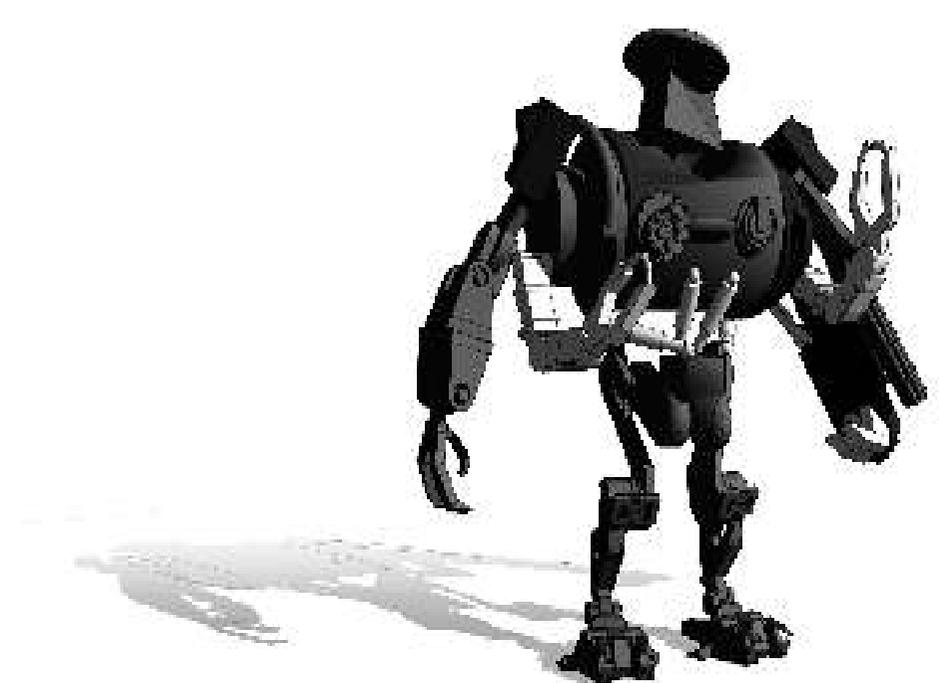
A character possessing a **futuristic** or **experimental** weapon can be part of a good story.

Defence contractors are developing hypervelocity projectiles that fly around corners, tracking a specific target.

Future grenades possess increased explosivity and lethality.

Just don't overdue your futuristic weapons. Give your characters agency so that their actions and words drive the story not the wondrous weapons.

Another of the most common of all firearm mistakes is characters using weapons that were **not available at the time the story is set**. If your story is set in 1985, you cannot arm your characters with weapons that were not made until 2004.



# 22. *Deus ex machina*

Avoid ***deus ex machina***, literally 'god from the machine'. Authors care for their characters deeply, invest a lot of time and effort in them. This makes them hesitant to put them in harm's way.

Suddenly saving your characters by *deus ex machina* causes the author to lose credibility.

Prime examples of *deus ex machina* are the appearances of the Great Eagles saving Gandalf, Bilbo and the dwarves from certain death in the *Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings*.

Don't let weapons in your fiction resolve otherwise irresolvable conflicts or act in inspired and unexpected ways that save your characters.

Guns are not magical talismans warding off evil. Nor are they shit magnets, attracting conflict by their mere presence.

A gun doesn't emanate waves of evil, forcing those under its sway to kill. The mere presence of a gun does not always make the bad guys run away in fright.



# 23. A more wretched hive of scum and villainy

According to the media, **gun shows** are freewheeling lawless operations where every kind of machine gun, explosive, and illegal apparatus can be purchased at whim with nary a concern for the law.

Machine guns, explosives and suppressors were **never available at any gun show** – ever. Despite this fact, I routinely read fictional accounts of machine guns, suppressors, and explosives bought at gun shows.

In the past, a few gun-show merchants and attendees were not as diligent as they should've been. Like any large group, gun enthusiasts have their bad apples. A few very public cases where a gun-show-purchased firearm became the topic of tragic news gave gun shows a bad reputation.

Gun shows today are well-regulated operations where most of the vendors are licensed merchants. Plainclothes police and federal agents stroll around gun shows. Larger gun shows attract both plainclothes and uniformed law enforcement.

Smart criminals avoid law-enforcement gatherings.



# 23. A more wretched hive of scum and villainy

The heydays of gun shows are long past. The internet killed gun shows more effectively than any politician could ever have. Sourcing illicit weapons from gun shows is an easy way of explaining their presence in your story.

**Be more creative when explaining the presence of illegal weapons in your story.** Consider sourcing illegal weapons and devices from notorious felons such as **drug dealers, gang members, and fringe extremist groups.**

Notorious gun-running criminal organizations such as the Russian mafia vor v zakone (thief in law) could provide a source of illegal weapons. Post-Soviet diaspora spread the Russian mafia to all corners of the world.

Chinese organized-crime syndicates known as tongs and triads may also provide illicit weapons in your story.

The Chinese mafia is in every corner of the globe, rivalling the former Soviet organizations. However, unless required, you don't have to explain the presence of illegal weapons in your story.

If illegal gun sources don't matter to the narrative, consider leaving them out.



# 24. The dump or expository over-burden

A common author mistake in gear-centric and *uberguy* fiction is **dumping equipment information in one huge block of text.**

For example: The hero dressed in Dragon Skin body armour, a Kevlar helmet with the ultimate NVG suite (with batteries that never die), an infinite selection of grenades, a pair of Kukri knives strapped horizontally across his back, a handle on each hip, a Spetsnaz shovel (strapped to his pack), a Smith & Wesson .500 Magnum pistol, a Serbu Super Shorty (a pistol-gripped very short-barrelled pump 12-gauge shotgun), a TAG Heuer watch, and a MOLLE backpack holding nine 50-round drums for his 7.62 NATO rifle.

Did your eyeballs roll back in your head? Don't put your readers into a coma with long, boring blocks of descriptive text. Your readers will skip over it to get to the action.

Readers finding themselves frequently skipping are **less likely to read anything else you write.** Skilfully weave gear and other information with character description throughout the story.

Apply Chekhov's *gun with caution* regarding weapons and accessories. Don't give your character a bunch of gear that he never uses. You're **loading the reader down with useless titbits when you need to get to the action.**



# So how does a writer *not* make firearm mistakes?

Most writers, unless dictated by the genre they choose to write, do not need extensive firearm knowledge. Most authors are not firearm enthusiasts; nor do they need to be to write excellent fiction with firearms. Unfamiliarity with firearms is not an overwhelming problem.

Depending on your story and its intended audience, you **may not have to get into firearms minutiae**. If you're unfamiliar with guns, keep it as stupidly simple as possible. Avoiding firearm mistakes is easiest if you avoid adding unnecessary firearm details.

Your story will not lack if you describe your character as carrying a Glock pistol. **One simple word is enough for the reader's mental image**. You may not need more gun details than that.

Don't chamber your character's Glock in .38 Special. Glock is a very popular make of pistol; .38 Special is a very popular revolver round unsuited to a Glock. That one simple firearms mistake is made repeatedly by a best-selling author writing extremely erotic urban fiction.

In my opinion, **mentioning the calibre of the pistol is irrelevant to the story**, and should be removed. Let's say the author's hero is a police officer so needs a pistol as part of her kit. However, the author's target audience does not care, nor are they likely aware of that frequent firearms mistake. If the best-selling author added a lot of firearms details to her books, her readers would just skip ahead until they got to the interesting parts. She could also lose a significant number of readers.

# How *not* to make mistakes ... continued

Remember the suppressed revolver using Chinese assassin mentioned in mistake #4? Did you catch the firearm mistake?

There is only one commonly available revolver on which a suppressor will operate correctly – the Russian Nagant. China has thousands of Russian Nagant pistols. By identifying the general's pistol as a Nagant revolver, a very old and distinctive model, the author could have maintained credibility while clarifying the reader's mental image of the Chinese general.

**Trust your readers;** don't railroad them into a narrowly defined character image. Let the readers come up with their own mental images with a few helpful suggestions.



# Those who get it right

**Stephen King** loathes guns. He avoids mistakes by keeping firearms use minimal in most of his books. For those books with a significant amount of firearms usage, King wisely sought advice from subject-matter experts.

**Amanda Quick** skilfully avoids firearms mistakes by making each gun unique. Several of Quick's books are set during a time when muzzle-loading duelling pistols were made individually. Quick has admitted that she doesn't know much about firearms, so she keeps things simple.

**Nora Roberts** writing as JD Robb avoids firearms mistakes by writing in the future. In Robert's In Death series, firearms as we know them are illegal and have been removed from circulation.

**Laurel K. Hamilton** writes dark erotic urban fantasy with significant firearms use. Hamilton said that her hero Anita Blake will never use a weapon that the author has not tried herself.

**William C. Dietz's** writing includes many varied forms of firearms. In Dietz's science-fiction novels he creates futuristic firearms. In his fiction, Dietz's knowledge of firearms is apparent due to his time spent in the US Navy and Marine Corps.

So how does an author properly write firearms in their fiction?

# Research: the World Wide Web



A warning: although one of the best author-research tools, the **internet** can also be a writer-trapping, time-wasting rabbit hole.

You go searching for gun information but instead waste hours reading about a new T. rex fossil discovered in China.

Use with caution.

Still, avoiding many of the previous firearm mistakes requires a simple internet search. Web pages dedicated to firearms may answer most of your questions.



Use **Pinterest** with care. Pinterest is a great writer's tool. However, it's also a mind-sucker that can up hours of writing time. Writer pinboards on Pinterest are an excellent source of information, guidance and inspiration.

Typing 'gun' into Pinterest's search feature provides a list column of popular weapons down the right-hand side of your screen. If you're unfamiliar with guns, search Pinterest for pins of basic gun shapes and types of weapons.

Pins on Pinterest are also a great way to get a good idea of what the gun looks like.

# Research: a few good firearm websites

## **World Guns**

<http://modernfirearms.net/index-e.html>

## **Concealed Nation**

<http://concealednation.org/2015/05/gun-glossary-every-term-you-could-possibly-need-in-one-spot/>

## **The Truth About Guns**

<http://www.thetruthaboutguns.com/gun-facts/>



The TRUTH About  
**GUNS**.com

# Research: recommended YouTube channels

Watch **YouTube** for gun-related videos ranging from idiots shooting themselves and other gun mishaps to enthusiasts shooting some of the largest and hardest kicking weapons available.

There are many excellent YouTube channels dedicated to gun knowledge, ranging from collectors and enthusiasts to gunsmith repair.



- **Hickok45** – a father-and-son team who try just about every gun available on the market. They shoot machine guns and suppressed weapons, and offer insights on whether they like the weapon or not.
- **Military Arms Channel** – run by a retired SF soldier, this channel specializes in military-type weapons. It offers common-sense, practical advice for concealed carry weapons as well as personal defence weapons in the home.
- **C&Rsenal** – in-depth curio and relic firearms history, specializing in older military weapons, especially those used in WWI and earlier.  
Forgotten Weapons – specializes, as the name suggests, in forgotten weapons. The channel deals mostly with military, but quite a few civilian market weapons are regularly featured. Do you want to give your character an obscure or unusual gun? Forgotten Weapons may give you an idea.

# Research: subject-matter expert (SME)

If you know someone you can ask, personal experience can be very helpful. Levels of experience vary, so it may be helpful to ask several people.

**Police**, members of the **military** and **veterans** are great sources of information.

A **gunsmith** can be a great source of information, but many do not have the free time to answer questions.

Attending **larger gun shows** grants access to many enthusiasts in one place.

If you don't know a local SME, Skype and other online video-conferencing tools can be quite handy.



# Research: go shooting

Visit a **shooting range** if practical. Most people in the shooting sports are friendly and enjoy sharing their knowledge.

Being polite and bringing your own **eye and ear protection** go a long way at a shooting range.

If possible, **borrow or rent the gun**. Hands-on is the best way to understand the firearm used in your fiction. Many shooting ranges in the US rent guns and offer basic lessons.

**Do yourself and your editor a favour** – bring a notepad and write down the guns that you shoot. Don't just write Glock; write the exact model and calibre.

Remember to include whether you **liked** the gun, any **problems** you had with it, and what it **felt** like.

When writing, **put the character in your shoes**. Would they like the gun? Would they struggle with the slide or try inserting the magazine backwards?

Personal experience with the gun gives your writing greater depth.



# Research: take a trip

Travel to find the gun by taking a **writer's road trip**.

Usually a sure-fire cure for writer's block, a road trip may breathe new life into your story. Take a notepad and record what you experience.

Shooting contests, military re-enactments, gun shows, museums and former military installations are excellent writer destinations. Don't be afraid to ask questions, and if possible handle the guns featured in your story.

**The Buffalo Bill Center of the West** in Cody, Wyoming, is a world-class museum in a small town. The Buffalo Bill Center is also home to the Cody Firearms Museum, the most comprehensive collection of American firearms in the world.

**The Winchester Arms Collection** is the heart of the **Cody Firearms Museum**, and includes the Winchester Company archives. Over 7,000 guns, including those

other than Winchester-made, are displayed at the Cody Firearms Museum.

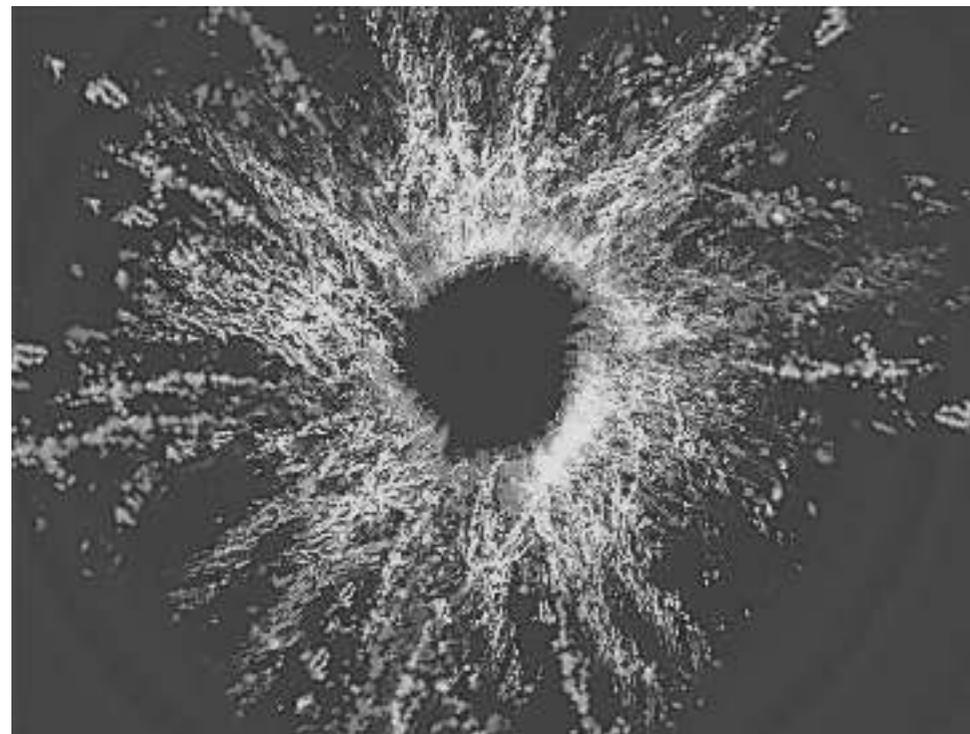
Las Vegas has several indoor gun ranges that rent machine guns. **Battlefield Vegas** rents just about every machine gun available including suppressed machine guns and a minigun capable of shooting 200 rounds of 7.62 NATO in 1.3 seconds.

Some US gun ranges rent firearms to foreign guests only when accompanied by a citizen. Call ahead to ensure they have the gun, and that they'll rent it to you.



# Summing up

1. **Examine** your writing – do you really need all of those firearm details?
2. **Simplify** your writing by removing unnecessary firearm details.
3. Know your **target readers**. Do they want to know exactly what kind of guns are used in the story or will they skip ahead to the interesting parts?
4. Will it matter if you describe guns exactly or can you use general gun terms without losing story **clarity**?
5. And, lastly, **relax**. You're as human and as imperfect as us all. A few firearm mistakes will not destroy your writing.



# ABOUT LOUISE

Louise Harnby is a professional fiction proofreader and copyeditor. She specializes in helping independent authors prepare their novels for market. Louise worked in-house for two international publishers for 13 years before setting up her editorial business. She has also self-published several books on the business of editing and proofreading. You can find out more about her at [www.louiseharnbyproofreader.com](http://www.louiseharnbyproofreader.com)

